

# Present, Engaged, and Accounted For

## *The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*

Hedy N. Chang | Mariajosé Romero

September 2008



The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) is the nation's leading public policy center dedicated to promoting the economic security, health, and well-being of America's low-income families and children. Founded in 1989 as a division of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, NCCP is a nonpartisan, public interest research organization.

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Hedy N. Chang with Mariajosé Romero, PhD

**AUTHORS**

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of UPS, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

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### Introduction

At the core of school improvement and education reform is an assumption so widely understood that it is rarely invoked: students have to be present and engaged in order to learn. That is why the discovery that thousands of our youngest students are academically at-risk because of extended absences when they first embark upon their school careers is as remarkable as it is consequential. Schools and communities have a choice: we can work together early on to ensure families get their children to class consistently or we can pay later for failing to intervene before problems are more difficult and costly to ameliorate.

Schools have served our country well as gateways to more opportunity for children. What happens when children first enter school deeply affects whether this opportunity is realized. During the early elementary years, children are gaining basic social and academic skills critical to ongoing academic success. Unless students attain these essential skills by third grade, they require extra help to catch up and are at grave risk for eventually dropping out of school.

Common sense and research suggest that being in school consistently is important to ensuring children gain a strong foundation for subsequent learning. Research shows that children, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status or ethnicity, lose out when they are chronically absent (that is, they miss nearly a month of school or more over the course of a year). Children chronically absent in kindergarten show lower levels of achievement in math, reading and general knowledge during first grade. Going to school regularly in the early years is especially critical for children from families living in poverty, who

#### What do we mean by chronic early absence?

Chronic absence refers to students missing an extended period of school when both excused and unexcused absences are taken into account. Given the critical importance of time devoted to learning, especially in the early years, we believe it is important to count *all* absences. We intentionally use the term “chronic absence,” because the more frequently used term, “truancy,” only refers to unexcused absences and connotes inappropriate student behavior requiring a punitive response. Rather than blaming children, we want to broaden awareness that missing extended periods of school could be an early sign of distress in school, community or home that could respond to appropriate early intervention. Moreover, when children are 5, 6 or 7 years of age, they are not likely to be absent from school without their parents’ knowledge.

We recommend defining chronic absence as missing 10 percent or more of the school year (equivalent to 18 days out of a 180 day school year) regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused. If children miss this much school while in grades K-3, it is chronic *early* absence. Although local and state definitions can vary, we propose this common definition since research by the National Center for Children in Poverty found that this level of school absence in the first years of school was associated with lower academic performance in subsequent grades.

are less likely to have the resources to help children make up for lost time in the classroom. Among poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicts the lowest levels of educational achievement at the end of fifth grade.

When chronic early absence occurs, everyone pays. The educational experiences of children who attend school regularly can be diminished when teachers must divert their attention to meet the learning and social needs of children who miss substantial

amounts of school. By working together to ensure all children attend school consistently, schools and communities make it more possible for teachers to teach and children to learn.

School attendance reflects the degree to which schools, communities and families adequately address the needs of young children. Attendance is higher when schools provide a rich, engaging learning experience, have stable, experienced and skilled teachers and actively engage parents in their children's education. Chronic absence decreases when schools and communities actively communicate consistently to all students and their parents, and reach out to families when their children begin to show patterns of excessive absence. Attendance suffers when families are struggling to keep up with the routine of school despite the lack of reliable transportation, long work hours in poorly paid jobs with little flexibility, unstable and unaffordable housing, inadequate health care and escalating community violence. At the same time, communities can help lower chronic absence by providing early childhood experiences that help prepare children and families for the entry into formal education.

Variations in these school, neighborhood and family conditions are reflected in tremendous differences in the prevalence of chronic early absence across communities. While national data show that chronic early absence affects an estimated one out of every 10 children during their first two years of school, data collected from nine urban localities (eight school districts and one region within a larger

school district) revealed significant variations. Across the districts, chronic early absence ranged from affecting only about one out of 20 children to nearly one out of four students in grades K-3. Ranges can be even greater within districts. For example, in one locality, prevalence at individual schools ranged from one to more than 50 percent of K through third graders.

Although chronic early absence can be a significant issue for particular schools and even entire school districts, it has largely been overlooked. The United States does not have a mechanism in place to ensure that schools across the country monitor and report on levels of chronic early absence. The Federal No Child Left Behind Act began requiring states to define and report data on truancy in 2006, but there is no provision regarding chronic early absence. Elementary schools often track average daily attendance or unexcused absences (truancy), but few monitor the combination of excused and unexcused absence for individual students. High overall school wide attendance rates can easily mask significant numbers of chronically absent students. While a growing interest in state data systems with universal student identifiers creates an opportunity to collect such data systematically, many districts have yet to develop the data capacity for tracking absences for individual students. As a result, many school districts do not know the extent to which chronic early absence is a problem in any or all of their schools.

This report seeks to raise awareness of the critical importance of chronic early absence, synthesize available data on the scope of the challenge, and share emerging insights about how schools and communities can use chronic early absence to identify and address challenges affecting the social, educational and physical well-being of children and their families before problems become intractable. While parents are responsible for getting their children to school every day, schools and communities need to recognize and address the barriers and challenges that may inhibit them from doing so, especially when they are living in poverty. Large numbers of chronically absent students could indicate systemic problems that affect the quality of the educational experience and/or the healthy functioning of the entire community.

### **How Can Elementary School Daily Attendance Rates Mask Significant Levels of Chronic Absence?**

Chronic absence is easily masked by school attendance statistics, even when average daily attendance appears relatively high. Suppose, for example, a school has 200 students and an average daily attendance rate of 95%. At this rate, 10 students are absent on any given day while 190 are present. The same 10 students, however, are not absent for all 180 days or they would be disenrolled. Rather, it is quite possible that the 10 students missing each day occurs because the school is serving 60 students who are taking turns being absent but when their absences are added together, miss a month or more of school over the course of the school year. In summary, even in a school with 95% daily attendance, 30% of the student population could be chronically absent.

This report is based upon the findings of applied research carried out with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Activities included secondary analyses of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), analysis of local data on student attendance patterns, a review of relevant literature, and information offered by practitioners, researchers, and funders about promising practices and programs. After describing the key components of this applied research project, this report addresses what is known to date from this inquiry about the following key questions:

- **What is the impact and prevalence of chronic early absence?** Chronic absence in kindergarten has an immediate impact on academic performance for all children, especially Latino students. The long-term consequences are most significant for poor children. While not an issue in all communities, chronic early absence can reach high levels district-wide as well as within schools, even when levels are relatively low district-wide.
- **What contributes to chronic early absence?** When chronic early absence occurs, we propose considering the extent to which schools, families and communities might play a contributing role. Often more than one factor is at play simultaneously. Since conditions can vary substantially, the particular factors

contributing to chronic early absence should be assessed for each school and community. Gaining clarity about the factors that lead to chronic absence is critical to developing effective solutions. Open deliberation and exploration about the relevant risk factors can help lay a stronger foundation for the development of appropriate solutions.

- **What are implications for action?** School districts throughout the United States need to be able to monitor whether and to what extent chronic early absence is a relevant problem in any or all schools based upon a common definition. If levels are significant, schools should partner with community agencies and families to understand and address the factors contributing to early absence in particular schools or populations. Strong, ongoing partnerships among schools, families and community agencies to implement comprehensive approaches over time are critical to ensuring all children have the opportunity to attend school every day.

We hope that a wide variety of readers working in related fields – including, for example, early childhood education, education reform, drop-out prevention, family support, and child and community health – will find this information meaningful and relevant. We invite policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and funders to consider integrating attention to chronic early absence into research, policy and practices related to their own agendas.

## How Did We Study Chronic Early Absence?

To deepen our understanding of the consequences, risk factors and potential strategies for addressing chronic early absence, this project, which started in the fall of 2006, has engaged in a mix of research activities. These included: (a) a new analysis of national data; (b) an examination of local attendance patterns in nine school districts; (c) a literature review; and (d) telephone interviews as well as electronic exchanges with practitioners and researchers with past experience addressing chronic early absence.

### *National Data Analysis*

To paint a national picture of how this issue plays out across the country, the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) examined data on chronic early absence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K). The ECLS-K, which is conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, includes data on children's development, family characteristics and functioning, as well as their school environments, collected from a national sample of 21,260 children from the time they entered kindergarten in 1998 until they reached fifth grade.<sup>1</sup>



ECLS-K data were collected in kindergarten, first, third, and fifth grade. Data on school attendance in the ECLS-K were gathered from school administrative records. For the purposes of this study, only children with complete absenteeism data (that is, number of days absent in all grades) were selected. Using this longitudinal data set, NCCP examined characteristics and academic performance for students with different levels of absences in a school year: 0-<3.3%; 3.3-<6.6%; 6.6-<10.0%; and  $\geq 10.0\%$ . In addition, this study explored the impact of children's health on school absences. Data on children's health status were collected from parents. Only children with complete health data were included in these analyses.

The national data analysis was carried out by Mariajosé Romero, PhD, with technical support from Young Sun Lee, PhD. For more detail on these results, see *A National Portrait of Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades; The Influence of Maternal and Family Risk on Chronic Absenteeism in Early Schooling; How Maternal, Family and Cumulative Risk Affect Absenteeism in Early Schooling: Facts for Policymakers*, and other publications available on the NCCP website ([www.nccp.org](http://www.nccp.org)).

### ***Examination of Local Attendance Patterns***

To further our understanding of how this issue plays out across communities, Casey staff and consultants worked with the Urban Institute, the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, the National Center for School Engagement, and Metis Associates to gather and analyze data from nine localities. All localities were school districts, except for one which was a geographic region within a large school district. The school districts, which varied in enrollment, were primarily located in urban settings and spanned pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. These sites were selected because district leadership allowed the researchers involved access to their data and all had data systems that tracked attendance for students even when they changed schools. (See Appendix A for demographic characteristics of the nine localities.) The names of particular communities and school districts are not included in this report; instead each locality has been labeled with a number.

Drawing upon the 20-day definition of extended absences (equivalent to 11% of an 180 day school year) used by the Maryland Department of Education, researchers involved in the local study agreed upon categories of absence to use for analysis: low (0-5.5%), moderate (5.5% -11%) and chronic (>11%) absence. Because the length of the school year differs across districts, it was necessary to use percentages (as opposed to number of days) to make comparisons across localities. If the NCCP definition (see above) had been applied to the local data, it is likely that local rates would be slightly higher than those calculated through this analysis, since it uses a slightly lower threshold (10 versus 11 percent or 18 versus 20 days of an 180 day school year). We recommend use of the NCCP definition in any future studies.

This research examined attendance patterns over time (when possible) for children in grades K-3 including differences in absence for children by grade, family income level, and special populations (including ethnicity, gender, English Language Learners [ELLs] and students with disabilities). Since access to data varied across localities, some analyses could only be conducted for a subset of the total group. Initially, we also sought to compare differences in patterns for children with excused versus unexcused absences, but the data were too unreliable, especially for comparison across localities.

In general, while the patterns found among these localities are useful for further understanding the national findings or suggesting further areas of research, we believe generalizing from patterns found only through the local data is premature since the localities were not selected as a representative sample of school districts throughout the country. Little is still known about the prevalence and nature of chronic absence in suburban and rural communities, although one study does suggest chronic absence may be more problematic in urban areas.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Literature Review***

A search was conducted to identify relevant literature from related fields. Through this search, we sought to identify: (a) literature documenting the impact of poor attendance in early elementary school on social and academic outcomes; (b) studies exploring the connection between chronic absence

and a host of possible risk factors (for instance, chronic health problems, early childhood experiences, involvement in child welfare, participation in public assistance, etc.) and (c) studies or program evaluations describing effective strategies for improving attendance or reducing chronic absence. In addition to seeking out evaluations of programs or practices explicitly designed to affect chronic absence, we also sought out research examining the impact on school attendance of other types of programs (early home visiting, preschool, after-school programs, asthma management, etc.).

### *Information Exchanges with Practitioners, Researchers and Funders*

In order to ensure that this work was informed by available research and grounded by the experiences

of existing programs, the project manager, Hedy Chang, contacted more than 100 practitioners, trainers, researchers and funders working in related fields (for instance, early care and education, K-12 education, children's health, welfare reform, child welfare, substance abuse) to find out if they were familiar with the issue of chronic early absence, relevant research or promising programs and practices for improving attendance. Group e-mail inquiries were also sent out to Head Start Directors, Public Education Network members, grantmakers funding in Early Childhood and statewide family support organizations. In addition to supporting the literature review, these contacts led to the identification of relevant program models for which in-depth interviews were held. Descriptions of several promising programs appear in Appendix B.

## What is the impact and prevalence of chronic early absence?

Chronic early absence matters because regular school attendance is important for academic performance and extended absenteeism can affect significant numbers of young children during their earliest years of school.

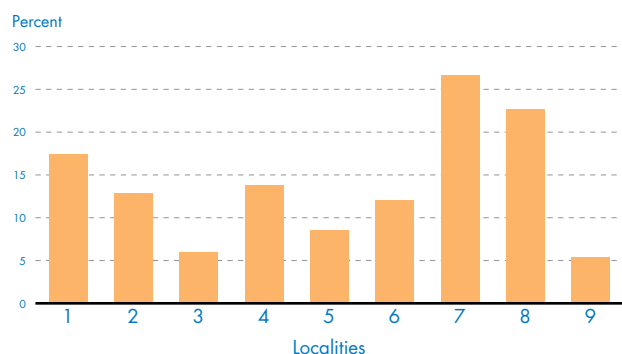
**Chronic early absence affects substantial numbers of children nationwide and is even more problematic in some districts and schools.** According to the analysis by NCCP, over 11 percent of children in kindergarten and almost nine percent in first grade are chronically absent. Chronic absence fell to six percent among third graders.<sup>3</sup> Researchers note, however, that these estimates are probably conservative, since attendance data are missing more often from schools serving low-income and minority students than from those serving more affluent students in the ECLS-K study, and low income students tend to have more absences.

Prevalence of chronic early absence varied markedly across the nine localities studied, ranging from affecting one out of 20 to almost one out of four students enrolled in grades K-3.<sup>4</sup> Chronic early absence can be much higher in particular schools than district-wide. For example, the incidence of chronic early absence ranged from one percent

to 54.5 percent across schools in a district where prevalence was 13.8 percent overall.

Especially when chronic absence reaches high levels, it is also important to consider the likely detrimental impact caused by the constant disruption to the learning environment for regularly attending peers, and the impact of unpredictable classroom dynamics on teachers' working conditions. For several localities, high levels of chronic absence existed in one or a handful of schools despite generally low levels of chronic early absence district-wide.

**Figure 1: Chronic absence across localities**



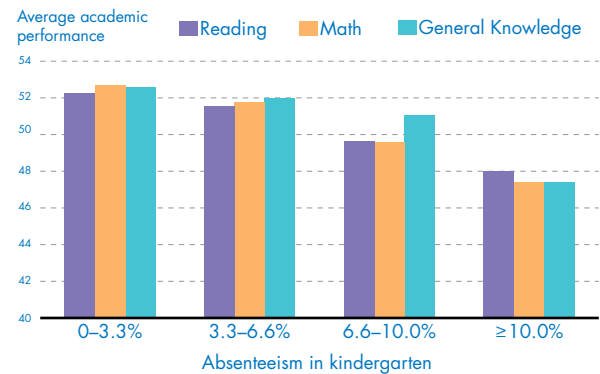
NCCP's national data analysis found that **chronic absence in kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance in first grade, especially for Latino children.** This negative correlation held true for all children regardless of gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic status. Participation in full-day as opposed to half-day kindergarten seems to lessen the negative impact of chronic absence in kindergarten among poor children.

The impact of early chronic absence appears to be most pronounced for Latino children. Reading scores for chronically absent Latino kindergartners were significantly lower than for their peers of other ethnicities even though they had missed similar amounts of school. This finding is especially notable given that Latinos, who are the largest and fastest growing minority group, now make up one out of four children under five.

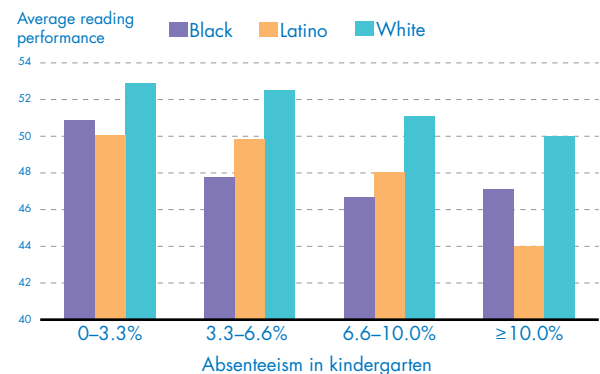
**Going to school regularly in the early years is especially critical for children from families living in poverty who are less likely to have the resources to help children make up for lost time in the classroom.** Among poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicts the lowest levels of educational achievement at the end of fifth grade.

The following chart offers more specific guidance about how to calculate prevalence of chronic early absence. This guidance reflects insights gained by the researchers involved in conducting the analysis of national and local data for this report about how to best calculate prevalence and what type of data challenges are likely to emerge.

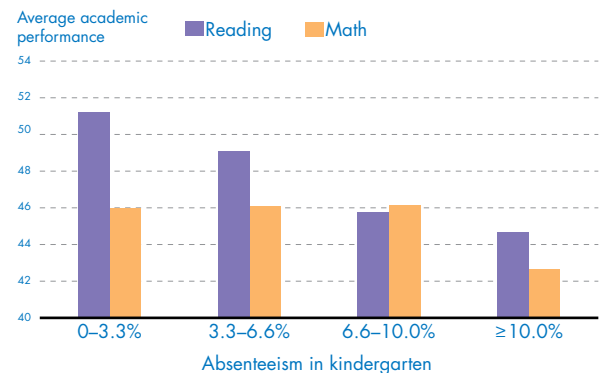
**Figure 2: Chronic absentees in kindergarten have the lowest academic performance in first grade**



**Figure 3: Chronic absence in kindergarten was especially detrimental to the reading performance of Latino children in first grade**



**Figure 4: Poor children who were chronic absentees in kindergarten had the lowest performance in reading and math in fifth grade**





## Steps for Analyzing the Prevalence of Chronic Absence During the Early Grades

<p>A major implication of these findings is that school districts should invest resources in determining whether and to what extent chronic early absence is a relevant problem for any or all of their schools. To ensure comparisons can be made across schools and communities, schools should engage in the analysis using a common definition of chronic early absence (missing 10% or more of the school year regardless of whether an absence is excused or unexcused). Below are suggested steps for such an analysis.</p>	<b>STEP 1</b>	Find out if your school district has a universal identifier (U.S.I) and if so, whether it is used to track attendance data. If it is not, begin discussions about how to include attendance data in the information tracked using the U.S.I.
	<b>STEP 2</b>	Find out if student attendance data are regularly and accurately reported every day for each student in every school and submitted to the school district. At the school level, care needs to be taken to ensure data are coded and stored in a consistent manner over time and across schools. Find out about agreements and policies regarding the treatment of suspensions, absences due to school transfers, disenrollment due to extended absence, etc. Understanding these policies will be essential to understanding how to interpret the results of an analysis of chronic early absence levels.
	<b>STEP 3</b>	Assuming a U.S.I is in place and data are regularly and consistently collected in schools, identify whether the district has capacity to engage in a thorough data analysis. If it does not, identify a data partner with the capacity to analyze the attendance data and work with the data partner to negotiate a release of attendance data (as well as other student characteristics) for analysis.
	<b>STEP 4</b>	Use district data to identify schools and populations with the highest prevalence of chronic early absence as well as levels of moderate and excessive absence. These additional levels are suggested because moderate absence offers insight into the number of children potentially at risk for chronic absence while excessive absence could help reveal whether the category of chronic early absence includes some children and families at even greater levels of risk.

## Calculating Prevalence of Chronic Early Absence

Question	Method	Potential Data Issues
1. What is the prevalence of chronic, moderate and excessive levels of early absence for the district as a whole?	Calculate the percent of students who are a) chronically absent (defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year and b) moderately absent (defined as missing between five and less than 10 percent of the school year) and c) excessive (defined as missing 20 percent or more of the school year). Calculate the number of days absent over the school year divided by the number of days enrolled for the school year.	If your school system does not track the number of days enrolled for each student, you might consider using the length of the school year as a proxy. Such an approach is not ideal, however, since it would undercount the level of absence among mobile children who leave the district before the end of the school year.
2. What is the prevalence of chronic, moderate and excessive absence by grade?	Code students by grade level. For students at each grade level, calculate the percent who are moderately, chronically and excessively absent. Please note while the applied research study examined K through third grades; you may find it helpful to look at trends K through fifth grades.	It may be important, beforehand, to determine how to code the grade level of students who have been held back or skipped a grade. If possible, conduct a special run to analyze absence levels for the children who have been retained.
3. What is the prevalence of chronic, excessive, and moderate absence for each elementary school?	Code students by their elementary school. For students attending each elementary school, calculate the percent who are moderately, chronically and excessively absent. Once this has been completed, identify the range, median and mean incidence at each school. Consider producing a list rank ordering schools by their level of absence and examining what percent of schools have more than 5 percent, 10 percent, and 20 percent of their students who are chronically or excessively absent.	
4. What is the prevalence of chronic, excessive and moderate absence by ethnicity?	Code students by the major ethnic groups in your school district, typically Hispanic/Latino, Non-Hispanic Black/African American, Non-Hispanic White, Asian Pacific Islander, and Other. If you have a large Native American population, create a separate code from "other." For each ethnic group, calculate the percent who are moderately, chronically, and excessively absent.	If the numbers of an ethnic population are very small, you might consider noting the small sample size but keep the data available on a disaggregated basis.

## Calculating Prevalence of Chronic Early Absence (cont.)

Question	Method	Potential Data Issues
5. What is the prevalence of chronic, excessive and moderate absence by special education?	Code students by whether they are identified special education or not. For each population (special education versus general education), calculate the percent who are moderately, chronically and excessively absent.	Agree beforehand around what types of categories should be coded special education for the purpose of this analysis.
6. What is the prevalence of chronic, excessive and moderate absence for English Language Learners versus English Language Speakers?	Code students by whether they are identified English Language Learners (ELL) or not. For each population (ELL versus not ELL), calculate the percent who are moderately and chronically absent.	If your population of ELL students is highly mobile and spends part of the year in another community, this calculation may seriously undercount chronic absence since students may end up dis-enrolled by the district before they end up counted chronically absent. This issue can be examined by calculating what percent of the ELL population leaves the school district before the end of a single school year and also reviewing district policies governing when a child is dis-enrolled.
7. What is the prevalence of chronic, excessive and moderate absence among poor and low income children as well as among those living in poor neighborhoods?	<p>Calculate chronic, moderate and excessive absence levels for children who are poor versus non-poor. Depending upon available data, this calculation could be derived using different methods.</p> <p>A comparison could be made between students receiving free and reduced price lunch data versus those who do not.<sup>5</sup></p> <p>If there is capacity to geo-code, student address information can be used to determine and code whether a student lives in a census tract where 30 percent or more of the residents live at or below the Federal Poverty line. A comparison can then be made between children living in high poverty census tracts versus all other census tracts.</p>	<p>Several challenges exist with using Free &amp; Reduced Lunch. Reliability suffers given the challenges of getting students to apply every year for the free lunch program. In schools with high levels of low-income students, some districts have waivers in place to serve the entire student population and do not maintain data for individual students.</p> <p>Geocoding can be problematic if there are errors in the student addresses which prevent a portion of the students from being geo-coded. A manual (interactive) geocoding method might be needed to resolve problematic addresses and attain a 95 percent or higher match rate. It would also be important to determine whether unmatched addresses represent a data bias. In addition, if the district is in an area in which there a number of new communities/ subdivisions/ developments, geocoding may be hampered by the age of the data used to geocode.</p>
8. What is the prevalence of chronic, excessive and moderate absence for children living in poverty by ethnicity, special education, and ELL status?	For each sub-population (for instance, ethnic group, special education versus general education, ELL versus Non-ELL), calculate prevalence of chronic and moderate absence for poor versus non poor students.	

## What Contributes to Chronic Early Absence?

An ecological perspective suggests that children's development and educational outcomes take place in the context of multiple, ongoing influences among children themselves, their immediate environments (family, school, peer group), and the larger environments (neighborhood, community, culture, society at large). Whether children attend school regularly reflects whether children's environments – including family, schools, community, culture, and society – adequately address their needs. While parents are responsible for getting their children to school every day, schools and communities need to recognize and address the barriers and challenges that may inhibit them from doing so, especially when they are living in poverty. Large numbers of chronically absent students could indicate systemic problems that affect the quality of the educational experience and/or the healthy functioning of an entire community.

Identified through our applied research, these contributing factors are offered below as questions to explore. Each would benefit from further research to ascertain the extent to which they hold true, especially in different localities. Gaining clarity about the factors that lead to chronic absence is critical to developing effective solutions.

### *School-Related Issues*

Schools themselves can contribute to high levels of absence among young children.

**Is chronic absence an indication that schools do not communicate the importance of regular attendance to parents in their home language and in culturally appropriate ways?** Schools play an essential role in promoting attendance by helping parents understand that coming to school, especially in the early years, is important to a child's academic success. Effective and clear communications to diverse families was found by Epstein and Sheldon<sup>6</sup> to have a significant impact on improving attendance and reducing chronic absence. Because teachers are respected authority figures in many communities, their guidance can be very influential, especially for immigrant parents who are unfamiliar

with the norms of U.S. educational institutions and perhaps even lack experience with formal education in their home country. The lack of Spanish-speaking school personnel who can reach out and communicate with a growing population of Latino families about educational matters, including attendance, appeared to be a major issue in the school district with the second highest level of chronic early absence in our local research.

**Is chronic absence a sign that schools do not monitor absences or contact families when children miss extended periods of time to identify and, where feasible, address barriers to getting to school?** Personal contact and outreach from schools can help families understand that attendance, even in the early grades, is important to children's academic success. When schools take a supportive and personal approach to contacting families about absences, they demonstrate that staff are concerned about the well-being of their children, and encourage parents to send their young children to school. Epstein and Sheldon also found that the presence of a school contact person to discuss attendance and related issues, along with home visits, reduce chronic absence.<sup>7</sup> Our local research appears to affirm this finding: a defining characteristic of locality #9, which had the lowest rates of chronic absence, is its ongoing and intentional approach to monitoring attendance and contacting parents as soon as troubling patterns of absences begin to appear.

The willingness of schools and districts to actively monitor absences may, in part, reflect the extent to which state school funding policies create incentives to invest in increased student attendance. Currently, only a handful of states base funding on average daily attendance (ADA). Most states allocate funding based upon student enrollment counted once or twice during the year, often in conjunction with a formula to provide extra funding for students with greater needs. At least one state has no consistent funding formula based on student enrollment; instead, allocations are determined through the political process. The locality in our study with the second highest level of chronic absence was located in this state.

**Is chronic absence a sign that schools do not effectively engage parents in their children's education?** Schools create an important foundation for parents to see themselves as active partners in their children's education. Schools and teachers that build strong personal relationships to parents and offer a variety of opportunities for involvement can make a tremendous difference. Research shows that the more schools reach out and engage parents, the more they experience gains in attendance.<sup>8</sup> Parents actively involved in their children's education are more likely to ensure children attend school on a regular basis.

Schools' efforts to involve families are frequently haphazard and uncoordinated with teachers' individual outreach to families, with little support from the larger school community. Typically, limited or no training is available to help educators learn how to form strong school, family and community partnerships. Outreach is often based upon trial and error rather than upon a coherent strategy informed by an understanding of the most effective practices.<sup>9</sup> Too often, schools focus parent involvement on activities (like fundraising or volunteering in the classroom) that fail to recognize and build upon the multitude of ways parents, especially from minority or less affluent backgrounds, can and do contribute to their children's education. Research shows that schools are more likely to increase attendance if they are able to engage parents of all backgrounds, including those who speak languages other than English.<sup>10</sup> Parents who are not involved in school have a much harder time seeing how their children are adversely affected when they miss school.

**Is chronic absence a sign that schools do not offer a high quality, engaging and safe educational experience?** Early attendance problems, especially if they occur at high rates throughout a school, could signify that children and their families are ambivalent about or even alienated from school. Repeated absences could be a response to ineffective teaching, high rates of staff turnover or teacher absenteeism, chaos in the classroom or bullying in school premises. Although most of the existing research documenting the detrimental impact of poor quality education on attendance focuses on older students,<sup>11</sup> it is likely this situation also applies to younger children, especially if their parents are aware of the problems in the classroom.

An issue worth further exploration is whether the high levels of chronic absence found among children in need of special education reflects, at least in part, the lack of a high quality, engaging educational experience. Across all nine localities, higher levels of absence occurred among children with Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs).<sup>12</sup>

### *Family-Related Issues*

While what happens in school matters, school attendance is deeply affected by family circumstances. Young children depend upon their primary caregivers to ensure they arrive at school every day.

**Is chronic early absence an indication that families are unaware of the adverse impact of chronic early absence?** Especially when children are entering kindergarten, families may not realize that attendance in kindergarten matters. Kindergarten has historically been viewed as a transition into formal education rather than the beginning of formal schooling. Many parents may not be aware of the changes that have occurred in schooling, especially with the onset of No Child Left Behind. This perception of kindergarten as optional is reflected by state compulsory education laws, which typically do not start until children are older, as well as the continued practice of only offering half-day kindergarten in many places. Nationally and across all of the localities studied, the incidence of chronic absence was consistently highest in kindergarten and then declined with each subsequent school year through third grade.

**Is chronic early absence an indication that families are poor and lack the resources (transportation, food, clothing, etc.) to ensure their children regularly attend school?** When families are poor, they lack resources (often taken for granted by many middle class families) that make regular school attendance much easier. Poverty and the lack of stable, affordable housing are clearly associated with the mobility issue described above. Barriers also include the lack of reliable transportation, nutritious food and limited access to health care. Sometimes, parents are simply too exhausted to wake up in the morning in time to get their children dressed, fed and to school because they are working night shifts and even multiple jobs to pay bills. Programs addressing chronic absenteeism have also

found that children were too embarrassed to go to school because they lacked clean, suitable clothing or did not have appropriate shoes or coats to endure rain or snow.

The data analysis carried out by this project found a correlation between chronic early absence and poverty. According to NCCP, absence in kindergarten and first grade increased when family income was lower. In kindergarten, children from families living in poverty were four times more likely to be chronically absent than were their peers from families earning at least 300 percent of the federal poverty level. In first grade, children from families in poverty were still 3.6 times more likely to be chronically absent than were their most affluent peers. While this disparity decreased slightly in third grade, it began to climb again in fifth grade.

**Is chronic early absence an indication that families are highly mobile?** According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, one of six children has attended three or more schools by the time he/she completes third grade.<sup>13</sup> Mobility is highly correlated with poor attendance.<sup>14</sup> When children move, they miss school while they are in the process of finding a new home and a new school. Mobility can continue to affect attendance even after a child has been enrolled in a new school. Children who are subject to multiple moves may actively avoid going to school because of the challenges of constantly adjusting to a new school where they lack relationships to adults or peers and may need to adapt to a new curriculum and teaching methods. To reduce the impact of mobility, some districts have sought to standardize the curriculum used by their elementary schools. While some families change schools because of educational concerns, the majority of changes are caused by shifts in the family's residence. Families who move frequently are often coping with serious life events including job loss, divorce, domestic abuse, foster care placement and poor housing.<sup>15</sup>

Especially in communities with large immigrant populations, mobility can occur when families move back temporarily to their country of origin for extended periods. Immigrant parents may not be aware of the detrimental impact of extended absences or that these can result in their child being

dis-enrolled from their school. Among families living in the United States without documentation, frequent moves could also occur in an effort to avoid detection by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services or if parents are detained in immigration enforcement operations.<sup>16</sup> Frequent movement back and forth between communities is not, however, limited to immigrant populations, but, for example, also can occur among young Native American students, when they move on and off reservation lands. It is also important to recognize, however, that absenteeism among highly mobile children is not always reflected in a child's school record especially if attendance is not tracked for individual students. In addition, when children move, they may be dis-enrolled before being identified as chronically absent.

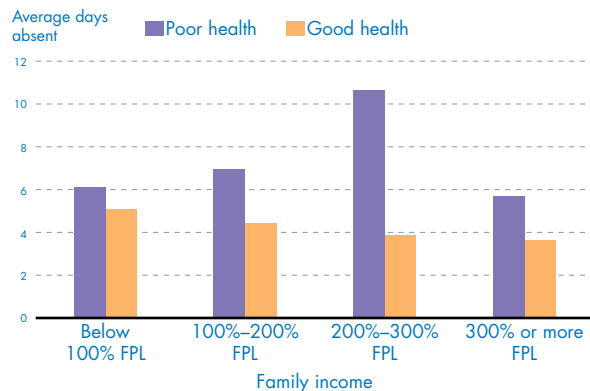
**Is chronic early absence a sign that families have difficulty addressing and managing illness, especially chronic disease among children?** Especially when families are poor, they also may lack access to medical care that helps to ensure being sick does not result in missing school. If families, for example, lack access to health care, their children can miss school because they do not get immunized in time or because an ear infection only gets treated after a long night in the emergency room. The presence of a chronic disease, like asthma, can make the situation even more difficult. Coping with asthma can be a tall order for most parents; it is an even greater challenge for those who are struggling to make ends meet and may not have access to medication or preventive health care that can help to avoid asthmatic attacks. Lower-income families are also more likely to live in communities affected by environmental toxins and air pollution, which lead to a greater prevalence of chronic disease and can trigger continued symptoms such as asthma attacks.<sup>17</sup>

NCCP's research revealed that among children rated by their parents as being in poor health, absenteeism significantly increased at 200-300% of poverty for children in poor health.

One possible explanation is that, at this income level, families earn enough to lose public health benefits, but too little to pay for private health insurance or the uncovered costs of health care.



**Figure 5: Middle income children with poor health missed school more often than healthy children**



### Does Race/Ethnicity Matter for Chronic Early Absence?

According to the NCCP analysis, nonwhite kindergarteners, except for Asian Americans, are on average, absent more days than whites. Absenteeism was markedly higher among Native American children and somewhat lower among Asians.

Such national results, however, were not always consistent with what occurred in the nine localities studied. In the one site with a large enough population of Native Americans (1.1% of the population) to include in the analysis, Native American youngsters also had the highest incidence of chronic early absence. But in four of the remaining sites, whites had the worst attendance patterns. African American students had the highest levels in three districts; Latino children in one. Although these local analyses also showed Asian American students were the least likely to be chronically absent in the early grades, it is important to recognize that this category, which encompasses a broad array of ethnic groups, can mask substantial differences between ethnicities.

This data suggest that while race/ethnicity does matter, how it matters may depend upon a number of variables. Poverty, for example, certainly is a key factor. Local data suggest chronic absence was higher among both white and black children who lived in high poverty neighborhoods. Differences in prevalence across racial/ethnic groups also reflect whether the current or historical treatment of the members of a particular ethnic group has an impact on the factors contributing to chronic absence. Chronic absence may increase, for example, if schools do not have the cultural or linguistic competence to communicate with and build relationships to families of particular language or ethnic backgrounds or address the learning needs of their children.

The local variations demonstrate the importance of avoiding assumptions about who will be chronically absent based upon their race/ethnicity and, instead, examine variations in attendance patterns and contributing factors by racial/ethnic groups.

Once families are more affluent, they can afford more expensive high quality care but are also more likely to have the knowledge and skills that support prevention and help handle medical crises such as asthma attacks. In addition, for families at the very lowest income levels, it may be difficult to distinguish whether absence is caused by a health issue or other challenges that make it more likely for children to miss school or some combination.

### Is chronic early absence a sign that families have a history of negative experiences with education and may not feel welcome in schools?

Although parents want their children to be successful, some parents may not have developed the skills, knowledge or beliefs that help them to support their children's education, especially if they experienced school failure themselves. Parents may feel reluctant to send their children to school if their own personal experience with formal education was negative. They may find that schools evoke memories of failure and alienation rather give rise to feelings of possibility and hope for a better future for their children. If a whole population of students demonstrates a consistent pattern of absenteeism, it may be important to explore whether this behavior reflects the existence of policies and practices causing wide spread alienation from formal education.

### Is chronic early absence an indication that families face multiple risks (for instance, living in poverty, teen motherhood, single motherhood, low maternal education, welfare, unemployment, food insecurity, poor maternal health and multiple siblings)?

NCCP found that chronic early absence was affected by a number of maternal and family risks, including living in poverty, teenage motherhood, single motherhood, low maternal education, welfare, maternal unemployment, food insecurity, poor maternal health and multiple siblings. While each one, by itself, had some impact on chronic absence, rates jumped significantly once families were confronted with three or more risks. As children continue in elementary school careers the impact of cumulative risk lessens briefly only to increase again in fifth grade.<sup>18</sup> Multiple risks were most commonly found among children living in poverty, from a racial/ethnic minority group or in poor health.

**Is chronic early absence a sign of serious problems that make school attendance difficult because family life has been disrupted and public agencies and schools lack a coordinated response?**

Among some families, chronic early absence could be a sign that they are grappling with serious problems such as substance abuse, mental illness (including maternal depression), domestic violence, child abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system. These challenges can deeply impair the healthy functioning of the family and interfere with the psychological and physical ability of parents to provide their children with the guidance, nurturing and skill building they need. Substance abuse seriously interferes with parents' ability to meet their children's basic needs, often creating high levels of chaos, neglect and isolation in the home.<sup>19</sup> The impact of adults' mental illness on parenting behavior, as well as the challenges of recovery and treatment, can seriously affect family functioning.<sup>20</sup> Recent research suggests that maternal depression is much more common than previously suspected, and can seriously impair the parent-child relationship.<sup>21</sup>

When domestic violence or child abuse occurs, school attendance and academic performance frequently decline. Children not only suffer from resulting psychological, and in some cases, physical, trauma but also experience instability in their living situations as victims seek out safe places to stay. If children enter the child welfare system, they may be subject to multiple placements. Often, the foster care situations are not coordinated to ensure that they can remain in the same elementary school. If parents become incarcerated, maintaining a stable and nurturing living situation can be even more problematic.<sup>22</sup> Violence in the home, substance abuse and parental incarceration often result in young children being placed in the care of relatives, typically grandparents, who may themselves be in precarious positions to assume parenting roles because they often are living on fixed incomes and coping with significant health issues.

**Community-Related Issues**

In addition to being affected by what happens in their own home, children's regular school attendance can also reflect community conditions. A community rich in supports for children and families can help make up for limited resources and educational opportunities in the home. If an entire community is economically distressed and plagued by violence, the impact of these conditions and a lack of positive social norms can make it difficult for even the strongest of families to ensure their children stay on track for school success.

**Does chronic absence occur when communities do not provide adequate supports to help children and families make a positive transition into elementary school?** Children's entry into kindergarten can be a major shift for families as well as children. While children must adjust to being in a large group, often with only a single teacher, parents must develop a relationship with their child's teacher and gain an understanding of the norms and expectations of elementary school. Both children and their families must also develop the daily routines that will support consistent attendance at school. Chronic early absenteeism could reflect the absence of needed supports in the community to help children and their families make this shift to a formal learning environment.

According to the NCCP study, children who spent the year prior to kindergarten in the care of family members were more often absent than peers who attended a center-based program or were under the care of non-relatives. This finding held true above and beyond differences in family income and race. One explanation is that children in the care of centers and non-family members may have an advantage because they have already developed the routine of getting to "school" on a regular basis. An additional advantage of spending time in a center or other non-relative care is providing children with prior experience in making the transition to being with someone who is not a member of the family. Children unaccustomed to this transition can become so anxious about attending school that they refuse to attend school, even complaining about physical symptoms. This situation is best resolved by ensuring the child attends regularly while also providing the child with reassurance to address his

or her fears. If not resolved quickly, these school refusal behaviors can result in more ongoing attendance challenges.<sup>23</sup> When children are in early childhood settings, teachers typically are working with fewer children and can more easily work with parents to allay children's anxieties about school and separation from their families.

Finally, chronic absence could reflect the lack of high quality early education experiences that help children gain the social and cognitive skills that make school a more positive experience. Given greater emphasis on formal instruction and skill acquisition in kindergarten, children must increasingly enter school already able to pay attention, exercise self-control and sit still for longer periods of time.<sup>24</sup> NCCP found that children had higher absenteeism if they were less socio-emotionally mature, according to their teachers' perceptions of the child's approaches to learning, interpersonal relations, self control, as well as externalizing or internalizing problem behaviors.<sup>25</sup> One argument for the expansion of preschool is that it helps children, especially the least advantaged children, gain these types of skills so they can be successful in school.<sup>26</sup>

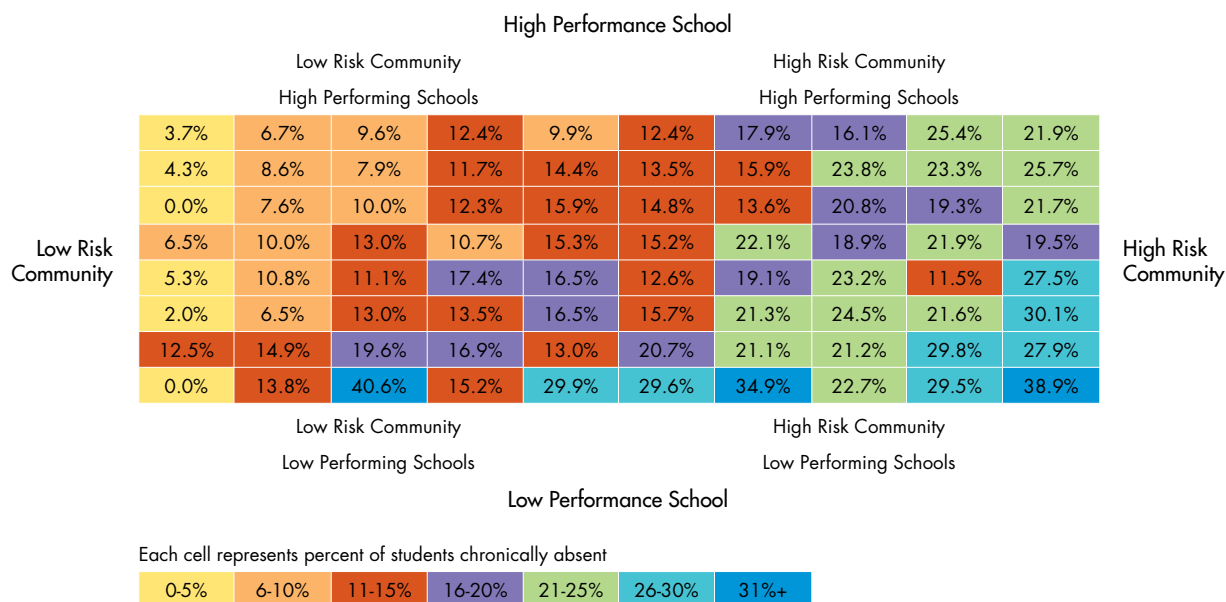
Participation in more formal early care and education programs is heavily influenced by economic status as well as by ethnicity. Affluent children are much more likely to attend preschool and their families have the resources to cover the cost of high quality programs. Latino children are less likely than any other ethnic group to attend preschool.<sup>27</sup> The lack of preschool participation among Latino children could help explain why chronic absence in kindergarten has an even greater effect on this population of children.

**Is chronic early absence a sign that the community is severely distressed and suffers from a dearth of formal or informal supports to promote children's positive development, including regular school attendance?** The number of children living in severely distressed neighborhoods has significantly increased between 1990 and 2000. A community is considered severely distressed when its population shares at least three of the four following characteristics: high poverty rate (24.5% or more), a large percent (>37.15) of single mothers, a high concentration of high school drop

outs (>23%) and a high percentage of unemployed working-age males (34% or more).<sup>28</sup> In neighborhoods, just as within families, these characteristics interact with each other to create an even more challenging environment than would be predicted by the presence of only one measure. Such neighborhoods also often suffer from a dearth of strong community institutions that can help support children and their families. When children grow up in these types of neighborhoods, they may be less likely to see positive role models or have access to community programs (such as mentoring programs or afterschool programs) that could encourage their attendance at school.

**Is chronic early absence an indication that a community is experiencing high levels of violence that adversely affect family functioning and getting children to school safely?** Ongoing exposure to community violence can have extremely troubling and powerful effects on the behavior and perception of those who have experienced it, and early chronic absenteeism could reflect the impact of high levels of community violence on children and their parents. Among a range of impacts, victims can lose their ability to trust other people and institutions, and can also become less likely to take initiative because they no longer believe they can get what they want, have less ability to distinguish between the impact of their own actions versus others and lack confidence in the validity of their own perception.<sup>29</sup> In such a situation, parents may be unable to provide children with the positive support they need to attend school on regular basis and achieve in school. As a practical matter, high rates of violence and community crime could also affect the ability of families to get their children to school, especially if the route involves crossing over gang territories.

In locality #1, data were available to compare differences between selected indicators of community well-being for the 10 percent of census tracts with the highest rates of chronic absent K through third graders versus the city as whole. This study found that rates for infant mortality, child/adolescent deaths, and juvenile violent deaths were each approximately 140% higher in the areas with chronic absenteeism than the city as a whole. Child abuse rates were 93% higher.



Although community violence matters, chronic absence might be, at least partially, remedied by a high quality educational program. Drawing from data for locality #1, the chart suggests that when school quality was high, children were less likely to be chronically absent in the early grades despite living in a high risk neighborhood in which many of their peers are missing extended periods of school. One possibility is families are even more inclined to ensure their children regularly attend a well run school since it also serves as a safe haven from community violence.

In summary, the extent to which any of these contributing factors can vary depends upon the specific local context or particular circumstances surrounding a particular child or family. In addition, it is likely that the array of major factors preventing children from going to school is associated with the overall level of chronic absenteeism. When chronic early absenteeism is relatively low (for example, between 0-8 percent), it is more likely to be related to economic and social challenges affecting the ability of individual families to ensure their children attend school regularly. When a large percentage of children are affected by chronic early absence (more than 20% of the population), it is likely indicative of systemic issues related to schools or communities.

If chronic early absence is a significant issue, schools and communities would benefit from a deeper understanding of the extent to which any of the factors outlined in this brief are relevant. The box below describes how schools and communities can gather qualitative and quantitative information to identify key contributing factors. As communities engage in this more comprehensive assessment, they can also combine research with action by piloting interventions targeting a group of children with high levels of absence. Below, Charlie Bruner describes how communities could use a technique adapted from health care to engage in such action research.

## Identifying Factors Contributing to Chronic Early Absence in Your School or Community

Once you have been able to collect data on the prevalence of chronic early absence for your school (and ideally district-wide), it is important to unpack the factors that appear to lead to children missing school for extended periods of time. Such factors can vary across schools, communities and different kinds of families. Generating a more informed picture of the story behind the statistics on prevalence is critical to developing effective interventions. Below are suggested activities to help you identify what is occurring in your school and community.

**1) Examine Data on Chronic Early Absence.** Step back and reflect upon the results of your school and district data on chronic early absence. Below are some issues to discuss.

- Does the level of chronic early absence affect a significant proportion of the student population (10% or more)? Is it higher or lower than the rest of the school district? (*High levels throughout a district suggest the existence of systemic challenges related to school policy or practice and/or problematic community-wide social or economic issues.*)
- Does the level of chronic early absence differ by different kinds of students and their families? By grade level? By race/ethnicity? Language background? Neighborhood of residence?
- What percent of the population of children who are chronically absent is excessively absent (missing 20% or more of the school year) and if data are available, persistently absent (consistently missing school for extended periods of times for several years in a row)?

**2) Obtain background information on basic school and community conditions.** Key sources of information include an interview with the principal, a review of any school or district or state attendance policies, school data (available on the Internet through the school district or such other websites as GreatSchools.net), and community data (Census data on family economics, structure, educational levels, language and ethnic background, data on child care supply and demand, statistics on crime, child welfare data, health data, etc.).

**3) Contact students and families when they are absent.**

When children are absent, especially for an extended period of time, contact their families to show concern about their child's well-being and begin obtaining information about the challenges faced to attending school.

**4) Conduct Early School Success Focus Groups.** Focus groups should be conducted with a variety of stakeholders, including parents, students, school staff (both teachers, support personnel, social workers, and school nurses) and staff of community agencies to learn more about early school experiences. Rather than limit the discussions to barriers to attendance, it may be more helpful to frame the discussions around early academic success in order to look at the overall situation and avoid feelings of stigma. Focus groups can explore barriers and challenges to academic achievement and school attendance, and can be used to learn what resources are available or missing to support students and their families. Ideally, focus groups should be organized in homogenous groupings by type of stakeholder, as well as by ethnic or linguistic background, to create opportunities for participants to discuss their experiences and to learn about common concerns and hopes that emerge across the different perspectives.

**5) Develop Parent Surveys.** To obtain input from a broader array of families, consider using the results of the focus groups to solicit input from an even broader array of parents about their early school experiences, including the regular school attendance. Remember to translate surveys if your school serves large numbers of families who speak languages other than English. Consider developing a team of parents of different backgrounds to help develop, disseminate and collect surveys as well as interpret the results



## Combining Research and Action: Using the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) Test Cycle to Develop Strategies to Address Early Grade Absenteeism

by Charles Bruner, executive director, Child and Family Policy Center

The **Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) Test Cycle** is a way to quickly assess a change in practice to determine its promise, get immediate feedback that can help revise and refine strategies, and learn as work proceeds. It is particularly useful in supporting real-world activities in ways that do not involve long-term commitments or detailed work plans and protocols for action. The four stages of the test cycle are:

**Plan** – develop the change to be tested or implemented

**Do** – carry out the test or change

**Study** – gather data before and after the change and reflect on what was learned

**Act** – plan the next change cycle or expanded implementation, building on what was learned.

Frequently, PDSA test cycles involve a small number of cases for a change that is implemented over a short period of time. PDSA test cycles have been employed in health care settings for such varied purposes as trying new techniques to remind patients of appointments (to reduce missed appointments), adopting new screening tools within well-child practices, and developing referral patterns with other allied health professionals (such as early intervention programs under Part C of IDEA).

PDSA test cycles also place practitioners who have identified or been made aware of a potential problem in current practice in a partnering role in developing and testing a solution. The short-term nature of PDSAs lowers their cost at seeking a solution, and encourages practitioners to promote, rather than resist, potential changes. It helps to build a practitioner constituency base for change.

PDSA test cycles could be a way to move from the identification of early elementary absenteeism as a school concern to taking action to address it. Examples of types of PDSAs that might be done include:

- A school with a high percentage of students who are absent more than 10% of the time decide to call parents of children who have missed at least five days of school during the first two months of school and ask them to come to the school to develop a school attendance plan for their children. The school will followup with parents over the next month at any time there is an absence, and assess the results in reducing subsequent absences.
- A school district has found that students often miss substantial numbers of days of school when they transfer during the middle of a year, due to a family move. The district will work to meet with the next 15 families whose children move schools within the school year and have missed at least a week of school in the process. In the interviews, the district will seek to determine what actions might have prevented the delay in enrollment, whether there were options for the child to remain in the original school at least during the time of the move, and what subsequent PDSA could be put in place to address this issue.
- A school with a high proportion of African American elementary students with high rates of absence could recruit African American parents to conduct an absentee watch for a month, contacting all parents whose children miss school to identify reasons the children missed school and develop plans for addressing those reasons.

## What Are Implications for Action?

Paying attention to early absenteeism can be an effective strategy for identifying and addressing educational and familial issues early on. To realize this potential, this brief suggests four major areas of action.

### *Monitor Chronic Absence*

Action starts with school districts throughout the United States determining whether and to what extent chronic absence is a relevant problem. School districts should:

- Improve the accuracy and consistency of local data on attendance maintained by individual schools and district-wide.
- Include absences among the data elements tracked with a universal student identifier, including among elementary school children and if possible, even among students attending pre-kindergarten programs. Including children when they enter pre-kindergarten programs could allow districts to identify if attendance is problematic prior to elementary school and to track whether participation in pre-kindergarten is helping to reduce chronic early absence in Kindergarten.
- Adopt a common definition of chronic absence (missing 10% or more of the school year regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused).
- Regularly calculate and report on the number of children chronically absent including excused and unexcused absences by type of school (elementary, middle, secondary) and by grade. Data should be made available to the public.
- Examine whether chronic early absence is higher among particular student populations as defined, for example, by ethnicity, English Language Learner (ELL) status, home language, participation in special education, gender, risk exposure, etc.
- Maintain chronically absent students on school enrollment files until the district can verify that students have transferred or moved out of district.

Additional data collection in school districts throughout the United States is especially important for understanding the prevalence of chronic early absence in rural and suburban areas as well as other urban school districts.

These data collection reforms can be supported with action at the district, state and federal levels. School districts can adopt these reforms as they improve their local data systems. State policy makers can encourage monitoring and reporting on chronic absence through legislation as well as administrative regulations. The federal government can also promote these improvements through technical assistance as well as public investments in education data systems.

### *Improve Attendance through Strong School and Community Partnerships*

If chronic absence levels are significant for particular schools, neighborhoods or populations of students, schools should partner with community agencies, including early childhood agencies, and families to understand the factors contributing to early absence to develop appropriate responses tailored to their realities.

### *Characteristics of Promising Programs*

Available research combined with the experience of pioneering programs, suggest that schools and communities can make a significant difference when they:

- address issues contributing to chronic early absence in their community;
- take comprehensive approaches involving students, families and community agencies;
- maintain a sustained focus on attendance over time;
- begin early upon entry to school or even earlier;
- combine strategies helping to improve attendance among all children with interventions targeting those who are chronically absent;

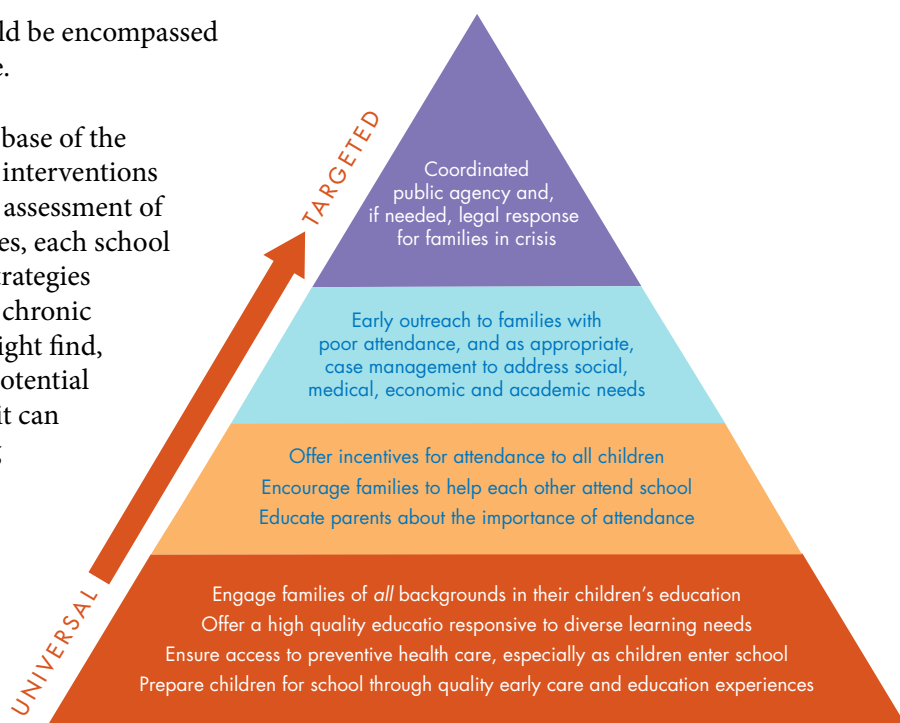
- take into account and build upon the languages and cultures of students and their families; and
- offer positive supports to promote school attendance instead of (or before resorting to) punitive responses or legal action.

A comprehensive and intentional approach characterizes the school district that had the lowest level of chronic early absence (5.4 percent) among the nine localities examined. Each school has an attendance team. Families are contacted as soon as students miss three days of school. Home visits occur after five days. This district has a strong track record of collaborating with public agencies and health providers as well as community-based agencies. It is located in one of the few states providing universal preschool education. Over the past four years, chronic early absence fell from 10 percent to 5 percent among young students living in high poverty neighborhoods. In this district, unlike all other localities examined, students from high poverty neighborhoods had better attendance than their peers living in other parts of town.

### A Proposed Comprehensive Response

The pyramid illustrates what could be encompassed within a comprehensive response.

The universal strategies lie at the base of the pyramid while the most targeted interventions appear at the top. Based upon an assessment of their own strengths and challenges, each school community can identify which strategies need to be put in place to reduce chronic absence. A school community might find, for example, that some of these potential strategies are already in place so it can focus its attention on the missing elements. Each of these possible strategies is discussed in more depth below along with references to existing models and promising practices.



### 1. Prepare children for entry into school through high quality early care and education experience.

Quality early care and education experiences are characterized by well-trained staff, low staff and teacher ratios, safe facilities and culturally, linguistically and developmentally appropriate curricula. Because these programs are often the first experience parents have sharing responsibility for raising their children, they can play an invaluable role in reducing chronic absence by orienting families to school norms and helping families make regular school attendance part of their daily routine. This can happen in part-day, part-week or full-day/full-week programs as long as the time and day of participation are clearly established and maintained and programs help in general to educate parents about how they promote the development of their children through regular routines and setting appropriate limits. A growing national interest in expanding access to preschool as well as in establishing pre-K through third grade programs offer important opportunities to ensure even greater numbers of children are prepared for the transition to elementary school.

**2. Ensure access to preventive health care, especially as children enter school.** Especially in communities with larger numbers of low-income and working poor families, it may be important to take additional steps to ensure all children have access to preventive health care in order to prevent avoidable illnesses becoming a cause of extended absence. Such steps can involve not only expanding enrollment in children's health insurance but also providing children with immunizations and comprehensive screenings (vision, dental, hearing and assessment for developmental delays.) While ideally such activities occur long before a child begins kindergarten, schools should be equipped to address immediately the needs of children who enter their doors without prior access to such medical services. School nurses are an essential component, especially if they can operate in partnership with resources available from public health departments, community clinics, medical facilities and even local medical or dental schools.

**3. Offer a high quality education that responds to diverse learning styles and needs of students.**

When schools offer a high quality educational experience that engages the interest of children and meets their learning needs, families are much more likely to feel going to school is worthwhile. The field of education encompasses a wide variety of school reform approaches, ranging from those focused on changing practices related to teaching and learning, to the creation of smaller schools that help to build and maintain a sense of connection among teachers, students and families. Regardless of its nature, any reform effort should have a vested interest in reducing chronic early absence since curricular improvements are difficult to implement if classrooms are constantly disrupted by the reappearance of children who have missed extended periods of school. In addition to supporting curriculum improvements and professional development for teachers, education reform initiatives could encourage schools to partner with social service agencies to address family and community-related barriers to learning, including chronic absence. The implementation of Project Grad in Atlanta, in Appendix B, illustrates such an approach.

**4. Engage families of all backgrounds in their children's education.** Attendance improves when schools effectively engage parents when they create a wide variety of opportunities for families from all backgrounds to support their child's learning. Such engagement starts with building relationships between teachers and parents.

According to the work of Joyce Epstein, several different types of parent involvement are important to undertake including : (a) *parenting* – helping all families establish supportive home environments for children: (b) *communicating* – establishing two-way exchanges about school programs and children's progress (c) *volunteering* – restructuring and organizing parent help at school, home or other locations (d) *learning at home* – providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum-related materials (e) *decision making* – having families serve as representatives and leaders on school communities.<sup>30</sup> Offering a wide variety of opportunities helps make it possible for parents from a range of backgrounds and with varying levels of availability (given work schedules) to participate, especially when outreach to families occurs in their home languages and by staff familiar with their cultural norms.

**5. Educate parents about the importance of attendance.** Educating parents about the importance of attending school can take a variety of forms and be incorporated into various types of parent involvement discussed earlier. It can begin with creating an opportunity during school orientation nights, typically held at the beginning of the school year, to help parents to understand why attendance is important because of its impact on the child, and to share relevant rules and regulations. Staff can use their interaction with parents throughout the year to talk with parents about avoiding long vacations while school is still in session or taking care to schedule doctor's appointments in the non-school hours. Schools can incorporate attendance into parenting workshops by, for example, offering a session on strategies for getting children to school every day, on time. Ideally, such workshops could combine advice from an expert with opportunities for sharing successful strategies and problem-solving among parents. In the PACT program in Hawaii, a series of attendance workshops were specifically designed

to meet the needs of parents of children who were chronically absent. After initially requiring parents to participate, the program shifted to a voluntary approach, which proved more successful.

**6. Encourage families to help each other attend school.** Schools can also facilitate and promote parents and students helping each other attend school. In Verde Involving Parents Program, for example, trained parent leaders receive the class roll lists from teachers and then called to check in with the parents of all absent students. As parents are called, the VIP parent leaders find out if families are experiencing barriers that could be overcome with the help of other parents, for example, helping each other out with drop-off and pick up. While more difficult situations should be referred to a social worker, the parent leaders can play an important role in helping their peers know that they are valued and should feel comfortable turning to each other for informal support. Relying upon informal support and guidance of friends and families has always been a critical ingredient in successfully raising children, including getting children to school regularly. As families have, however, become more mobile, often living far away from natural networks of support, schools are becoming increasingly important community institutions and places for forging and establishing relationships of mutual support.

**7. Offer incentives for attendance to all children.** Many schools offer incentives, both material (such as pencils, or toys) and emotional (acknowledgment in class, at morning assembly or in the school newsletter, extra recess time, opportunities to dress casually if uniforms are required) to children or sometimes parents for excellent attendance records. Whether incentives should be material is a matter of some debate: some practitioners feel the change in behavior should not be in response to an external reward, while others feel that material incentives, including financial stipends to parents, can effectively motivate participation among harder to reach families. Equally important, schools with limited budgets should be aware that if they are creative, they can engage in a wide variety of low or no cost approaches to creating incentives for attendance. Finally, as schools develop incentives, attention should be paid to rewarding attendance without encouraging the practice of sending sick children to school.

**8. Conduct early outreach to families with poor attendance, and as appropriate, case management to address social, medical, economic and academic needs.** Every promising program identified through this applied research project actively tracked attendance and contacted families when children were absent. Programs varied, however, with respect to when a contact was triggered. In most programs, a more personal contact did not begin until after children had been absent for a defined period of time. Contact would often begin with the school sending a letter. It would then progress to a phone call or a home visit. Often school sites form attendance teams comprised of the administrator, teachers, attendance staff, and a school social worker and/or nurse if available, to help carry out this function.

A social worker to provide ongoing case management is often very important for helping families struggling to overcome significant barriers to school attendance. Social workers can help families to establish short- and long-term goals to ensure their child's educational success, develop an action plan as well as identify and secure social, medical, economic and educational resources needed to address the needs of their child or the family as a whole. A social worker can come from a collaborating public agency or community-based organization as well as from the school or school district. The Check & Connect Program found that working with the family over an extended period of time and staying with families even as they change schools is a key ingredient.

Family support programs, if they exist in a community, are particularly important resources for expanding capacity to provide such outreach. Voluntary in nature, family support programs use a strength-based approach to fostering family resiliency and offer an array of supports such as parent education, peer support groups, assistance with basic needs (food, clothing, etc.), and referrals to other community resources. Family support programs can target resources and outreach to chronically absent families and help families understand why and how they can encourage attendance and academic success at home. Increasingly family support agencies are also beginning to expand their array of support to include economic supports (such as free tax



preparation education, increased utilization of tax credits and public subsidies, and even debt counseling and financial management training) that may help families to address financial challenges.

**9. Coordinate public agency and, if needed, legal response for families in crisis.** When families are in crisis, coordination among public agencies seeking to address the situation is essential. Consider, for example, what happens when a child is taken into child protective custody. Too often arrangements are made without attention to ensuring that children in the child welfare system can stay in the same school and with teachers with whom they have already built a relationship of trust. Child welfare agencies can change this situation by aligning agency operations with the geographic boundaries of schools. Neighborhoods for Kids in San Diego has not only assigned social workers to schools but it has also developed “Way Station” foster homes that take children 24 hours a day near schools in the geographic areas with the highest levels of child abuse. The Way Stations continue to transport children to their home schools while in their care for up to 30 days. The child welfare agency then seeks a permanent placement that will keep the child in the same school. While the nature of the coordination needed can depend upon the nature of the situation (for instance, child abuse, mental illness, substance abuse, parental incarceration), it is clear that public agencies should be working closely with schools to minimize the extent to which involvement in their systems disrupts the ability of children to attend to school.

Such coordination should also extend to the legal system, especially if legal action is merited because extensive absences continue even after supportive positive approaches have been offered. Sometimes, the threat of arrest can motivate families to change their behavior without needing to resort to prosecution. If prosecution occurs, the Truancy Arbitration Program in Jacksonville, FL, found it helpful to tailor the court response to the attendance situation. Rather than send a parent to jail (which might exacerbate the challenges of getting children to school), a judge can, for example, require parents to attend school with their child for several days as a form of community service and require regular school attendance as a condition for parole.

### *Embed Chronic Early Absence into Relevant Initiatives*

Given the plethora of existing initiatives and inter-agency collaborations, the goal of this brief is not to advocate for the creation of a new reform effort focus on reduction chronic early absence. Rather the goal is encouraging researchers, policy makers, practitioners, agency administrators and existing collaboration to embed attention to chronic early absence in relevant initiatives. Opportunities to do so exist in a variety of fields. Below are just a few examples.

Recognizing the critical importance of laying a strong foundation for subsequent learning during the early years, the last few years has heralded the development of a broad array of initiatives aimed at improving school readiness and even reaching into the early grades to ensure early school success. Such initiatives, whether they involve expansion of preschool or creating a continuum of learning from pre-K to third grade, can weave in educating families about regular attendance. Often, such efforts are also accompanied by the creation of tools, like child passports and school readiness assessment aimed at improving the transition to school by ensuring schools receive information about the social, emotional, and cognitive development of incoming kindergartners from their preschools. Since preschools are likely to detect troubling attendance patterns first, such tools could be designed to help notify elementary schools when chronic absence is occurring and trigger the provision of extra supports to these children and families as they enter kindergarten.

Similarly, school-based and linked health programs already exist to some degree in many communities. As efforts occur to strengthen or expand these services, attention could be paid to identifying which illnesses or chronic diseases cause extended absence among young children in their communities. Health practitioners could also serve as an important first line of contact with families since they can identify a variety of barriers to attendance as they assess the health situation.

Many communities are now aware that they face a drop-out crisis, especially among low-income and minority youth. The work of Robert Balfanz

indicates that this crisis can be stopped if communities develop a deep understanding of when and why students cease to attend school and gather and target human resources to embark upon a comprehensive dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery system targeted at the key points when students fall off the path to graduation. In addition to focusing on the problematic transitions into middle and high school, a truly comprehensive system would also involve addressing chronic absence when it first occurs as children enter school.<sup>31</sup>

### *Conduct Further Research*

While chronic early absence is an important issue and we know enough to take action immediately, additional research would be helpful to deepen understanding about the consequences, prevalence and effective strategies for improving attendance. Specific areas include:

- longitudinal data analysis to examine long-term academic and social outcomes for children chronically absent in the early grades;
- an assessment of the prevalence and impact of chronic early absence on children living outside of urban areas, especially in rural communities;
- further study of chronic early absence among immigrants including an analysis of differences in patterns between first and second generation immigrants and the impact of mobility; and
- analysis of the prevalence and factors contributing to chronic early absence for children with different types of disabilities.
- Inclusion of chronic early absence in evaluations of the impact of various programs serving young students and their families.
- Research examining whether children with troubling attendance patterns in the early grades can be identified even earlier in preschool.
- A multi-site study to determine how chronic early absences is affected by different family, school and community variables (including for example, poverty, proximity to school from child's home, rates of community violence, school funding formulas, age of compulsory education, educational program quality, levels of parent education as well as the availability of preschool education, afterschool and family support programs).

## Summary

Paying attention to early absenteeism provides an invaluable opportunity to identify and address social, emotional, cognitive and familial issues early on. It offers a chance to intervene before children have fallen years behind the academic performance of their peers and lost hope in ever succeeding in school. Using absenteeism as a trigger for early intervention could be especially important for closing the achievement gap for low-income

families as well as for children from communities of color. Schools and communities, however, cannot take advantage of this opportunity to take an upstream approach to addressing problems unless chronic absence is tracked and monitored for each student. Ensuring every child has an equal opportunity to reach his or her potential requires making sure every child is present, engaged and accounted for as soon as they begin school.

## Appendix A: Demographic Characteristics of Participating Localities

	LOCALITIES								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7 <sup>32</sup>	8	9
Type of community	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban & suburban w/ some rural	Urban and some suburban	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban & suburban
Geographic region	Mid-Atlantic	Rocky Mountains	North Western	South Atlantic	Southern	Pacific	Mid-Atlantic	North East	South Atlantic
Funding formula	Fall enrollment	Fall enrollment	Fall enrollment	ADA	Fall enrollment	ADA	Fall enrollment	No formula	Spring/Fall enrollment
Age of compulsory attendance	5-16	7-17	6-16	6-16	6-16	6-18	8-17	6-16	6-16
Total student pop	82,381	73,399	31,598	125,504	48,025	41,467	18,623	24,800	32,842
Grades	Prek-12	Prek-12	Prek-12	Prek-12	Prek-12	Prek-12	Prek-12	Prek-12	Prek-12
Total K-3 students	24,193	29,155	9,123	41,782	29,267	13,154	5,653	7,595	11,576
% chronically absent K-3 <sup>33</sup>	17.4	12.9	6.0	13.8	8.6	12.0	26.7	22.7	5.4
% moderately absent K-3	24.6	24.1	24.0	25.7	25.1	21.9	37.3	33.4	20.2
% Latino K-3	2.80	59.80	18.00	6.38	4.50	38.70	2.10	60.30	4.30
% Black K-3	87.10	16.90	17.90	42.40	35.60	34.50	95.20	20.90	61.20
% White K-3	9.10	19.00	54.50	42.68	53.80	8.50	2.00	12.80	29.80
% API K-3	0.80	3.20	5.60	3.51	2.30	17.50	0.30	5.20	1.80
% Other K-3	0.20	1.10	4.10	4.87	2.80	3.30	0.80	0.08	2.80
% English learners K-3	2.50	NA	16.9	1.92	3.6	38.9	1.1	26.3	NA
% Special education K-3	14.30	NA	9.1	21.78	16.7	7.8	14.7	16.4	10.1
% K-3 residing in high poverty census tracts	28	NA	6.90	NA	11.8	17.1	NA	71.7	12.6

## Appendix B: Examples of Promising Programs for Reducing Chronic Early Absence

### *Check & Connect, Minneapolis, MN*

Check & Connect was first developed as a truancy prevention model among urban middle and high school students and initially with a special education population. But it is now used with a general student population and has been successfully piloted with elementary age children as well. Its comprehensive approach emphasizes relationship building, routine monitoring of alterable indicators (for instance, attendance, academic performance, behavior), individual and timely intervention, problem-solving and strengthening affiliations between school and learning. A key component is a monitor or mentor who is responsible for working with students and their families to support their participation and engagement in school. Among elementary aged children, a monitor engages in family outreach and helps parents to be active partners in their children's education. Monitors are typically trained professional social workers who operate at the district level so that they can continue to work with children even if they move to a different school. An evaluation of Check & Connect's implementation in nine elementary schools showed significant increases in the percentage of students whose absences or tardies dropped below five percent of the time. School staff also reported increased engagement among students and their parents.

*Program Contact:* Sandra Christianson, professor, University of Minnesota, School of Psychology (Chris002@umn.edu)

### *Project GRAD/ Communities in Schools, Atlanta, GA*

Project GRAD Atlanta is a research-based school-community collaborative designed to improve student academic performance, and increase the numbers of young people graduating from high school and attending college. CIS implements the Family Support Component of Project GRAD. CIS staff in GRAD schools offer guidance, counseling, community outreach, and family support services to all students, especially those experiencing academic difficulties or family issues. Project GRAD Atlanta was initiated in 2000 and now impacts more than 16,000 students in 27 Atlanta schools, including

18 elementary schools, six middle schools and three high schools. The overall Project GRAD model involves working in a school feeder pattern and helping them to implementing the following elements: reading curriculum, math curriculum, parent and community involvement, social services, academic enrichment, and classroom management. Data tracked by CIS shows in schools where the program has been in place for more than two years, the average percent of students missing 15 or more days in schools fell from 18% to 9 % from 2001-2006.

*Program Contact:* Patricia Pflum, executive director, Cities in Schools of Atlanta (Pflum@cisatlanta.org)

### *Project PACT (Partnering to Assess and Counteract Truancy), Oahu, HI*

Project PACT included a school based program working with students and families of two elementary school serving low-income students on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. Each school had an attendance monitor hired from the community whose primary purpose was to work with teachers and counselors to identify and address the needs of students with attendance problems and their families. While the school retains primarily responsibility for contacting and convening meetings with parents of absent children, the attendance monitor builds relationships with parents and encourages them to help their child engage in school. They also serve as responsible caring adults for students who, unfortunately, have none at home. If absences continue, parents are encouraged to attend parenting attendance workshops helping them learn new parenting skills and understand the importance of regular school attendance. Because some parents need a "little push," the services of Child Protective Services and the courts were used as needed. A review of the data maintained on-line on program participants shows an improvement in attendance and a significant decrease in unexcused absences (from 19.55 at intake to 5.03 after six months) as well as a decline in tardies and excused absences.

*Program Contact:* Patrick Nakamura, College of Education, University of Hawaii (patrickn@hawaii.edu)

### *Savannah Chatham School District, Savannah, GA*

The Savannah Chatham School District takes a very thorough and comprehensive district-wide approach to addressing chronic absenteeism. After three days of absence letters are sent home. If the child is absent five or more days, a social worker pays a home visit to find out what is happening and to help the child return to school. By the 10 days, several agencies including the police are involved in determining how to improve the situation. Within each school, the principal receives a data “dashboard” showing him or her which children have been absent and for how long. The principal convenes weekly attendance meetings with the social worker, counselor and teacher to review the situation, if appropriate with the parent as well. At the district levels, a Student Truancy Attendance Monthly Protocol Senate brings together a broad array of stakeholders including school administration, the courts, nurses, and community groups to review data on attendance and learn about best practices.

Children and families attending Savannah Chatham schools also benefit from an array of supports and resources offered in collaboration with other agencies. For example, through the support of a local businessman, a parent university was established several years ago. Held quarterly on a Saturday, this parent university brings resources and classes to parents aimed at helping them gain skills and knowledge based upon their interests. Child care is available on site. The public health department also offers resources to schools including eye assessments, health fairs and professional development for teachers on chronic diseases affecting children. Most recently the district, with support from the city manager and an array of other public agencies and non-profits, created a comprehensive assessment center. The center is available to assess the needs of children and families, link them to available community resources and then follow-up to ensure their needs are met. The district donates use of the building while other agencies provide their services on site using their own agency resources. A review of data on chronic early absence shows that prevalence is very low at 5.4% in 2006. From February 2003 to March 2006, the incidence declined from 10% to 5.0% in among children from

high poverty residential areas. For the past two years, chronic early absence has been slightly lower among children living in high poverty areas than their peers living elsewhere in the district.

*Program Contact:* Quentina Miller Fields, senior director of pupil personnel, Savannah Chatham School District (Quentina.Fields@savannah.chatham.k12.ga.us)

### *Truancy Arbitration Program, Jacksonville, FL*

The Truancy Arbitration Program begins when elementary students continue to have attendance problems even after an attendance intervention team staffed by the school has met with them about the problem. At that point, the State Attorney’s Office summons the family to a hearing held at their offices. TAP hearings are facilitated by State Attorney volunteers who act as arbitrators for the program. School social workers also participate in the hearings. If there is a problem, the social worker and a case manager working out of the State Attorney Office attempt to rectify it. When appropriate, students are referred for counseling and tutoring. Parents are referred to parenting skills office. After each hearing the parents and the student are required to sign a performance agreement compelling school attendance. If they do not abide by this agreement, parents can be arrested on the basis of contributing to the delinquency of a minor – a first degree misdemeanor as well as a second degree misdemeanor for failure to comply with compulsory school attendance laws. If this is the first time, usually the DA requests that they do not serve jail time but serve one year probation. Typical stipulations are to require parents pay for court costs, attend parenting classes, attend school with child for three full days (so they can see what child is missing) and make sure that all children in the home attend school with no unexcused absences or tardies. Program evaluations conducted by the National Center for School Engagement found significant long-term improvement in both attendance and grades.

*Program Contact:* Shelley Grant, program director, TAP, State Attorney’s Office (shelleyg@coj.net )



### *Verde Involving Parents, North Richmond, CA*

Verde Involving Parents (VIP) believes that students will do better academically if students come to school regularly and have the tools and skills to manage conflict and negotiate relationships and if parents and community residents are positively involved in day-to-day life at the school. Its staff members, called Family Partners, are parents and/or residents of the North Richmond community. Family Partners contact the families of every absent and tardy student by phone and home visit. They offer referrals and resources (for example, bus tickets, alarm clocks, raingear, etc.) to help get children back to school as soon as possible. When families face particularly intense challenges, they are connected to a multidisciplinary team of professionals from the Family Service Center. Family Partners also help teachers by working with students when they act out in class to help them get their needs met without disrupting the class and to

teach students violence prevention/conflict resolution skills. VIP also offers parents training on how to help children build empathy and solve conflicts peaceably at home, gives monthly student awards for good attendance and holds community-building activities for families. VIP reduced absences at Verde elementary school by more than 50% and tardies by 38% over four school years, and pushed monthly attendance rates from under 89% to over 93%. During that same time frame, VIP returned over \$470,000 in vitally needed Average Daily Attendance revenue to the district. Verde elementary school also experienced substantial improvements in test scores: its API rose from a base score of 315 in 2000 to a growth score of 609 in 2006. In 2007, VIP began to apply its model to the nearby Helmes middle school.

*Program Contact:* Paul Buddenhagen, program manager, Contra Costa County Service Integration program ([pbuddenh@ehsd.cccounty.us](mailto:pbuddenh@ehsd.cccounty.us))

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32. Unlike the other localities, this is a region within a larger school district.

33. Data on chronic and moderate absence are for May 2006 in all sites except for site #2, whose data are for April 2005.



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